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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study, which was designed to improve the content of parent education programs, investigated perceived interests and needs of female single parents. Participants were 66 female, single, custodial parents between 20 and 44 years old with children 7 years of age or younger. The sample was drawn from mothers who were participating in family life education classes and whose children were enrolled full-time in on-campus child care facilities at community colleges in the urban Pacific Northwest. A 47-item questionnaire was developed to explore: (1) topics for parent education programs to address; (2) support such a program could offer; (3) factors influencing participation; (4) methods of information presentation; and (5) demographic variables. Findings indicated that mothers were interested in receiving instruction on several topics, including the understanding of children's emotional needs, effective disciplining techniques, methods of increasing effective communication, the process of learning how to deal with difficult issues, and ways to locate high quality child care. Mothers' interest in support services centered on programs offering recreational or stress-relieving activities and opportunities to locate male role-models for their children. Findings concerning program participation suggested a need for particular class schedules and indicated preferences for certain ways of presenting information. (RH)

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FEMALE SINGLE PARENTS EXPRESSED NEEDS FOR CONTENT OF PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Karen Quist-Peña and Sherrill Richarz

ABSTRACT

This study examined single parents' perceived needs regarding content of parent education programs. The areas examined included topical areas of interest, support issues related to the adults, factors influencing participation, and methods of information presentation.

Participants in this study were female single parents (N=66) with children age seven (7) or younger. The sample was drawn from single-parent mothers participating in family life education classes or whose children were enrolled in on-campus child care facilities at community colleges.

Results indicated parental needs in topical areas of interest included understanding emotional needs of children, effective techniques for disciplining children, methods of increasing effective communication, learning how to deal with difficult issues, and how to locate quality child care. The highest level of adult support interest was for either of two programs 1) to offer recreational or stress-relieving activities and 2) opportunities to locate and develop opposite-sex role-models for children. Participation factors reflect a need for specific

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schedules and presentation preference. Results of this study have implications for service providers who offer parent education programs to single-parent custodial parents.

SINGLE PARENTS' EXPRESSED NEEDS FOR CONTENT OF PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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During the last decade in the United States, the number of single-parent families with children under the age of 18 has increased by 86 percent (Census Notes, 1985). Predictions have been made that by 1990, one of every three families will be headed by a single parent (Newsweek, 1985). The largest number of single parents are women, and mothers-only families are continuing to be created (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986).

Single-parent families constitute 25% of American families and are defined as a family consisting of one parent figure with one or more children under the age of 18 residing in the household. The parent may have never married, be widowed, divorced, or separated and is raising children related by blood, marriage, adoption, or through foster care arrangements. With a high divorce rate and the fact that many people are residing in single-parent homes, family life educators must be concerned with this changing lifestyle. The needs of single parents must be addressed and educational programs should be designed to meet the needs of single parents (Porter & Chatelain, 1981).

A review of current literature points to a lack of knowledge regarding the information needs of single parents - what

information single parents want. Crase, Carlson, & Kontos (1981) found little research has been designed to determine parents' information needs and what sources of information they used to meet their needs. The few studies conducted on sources of parent information have found parents use a variety of information resources preferring those such as pediatricians, parents, friends, and teachers to books, magazines, and other print materials (Crase, Carlson, & Kontos, 1981; Eiduson, Kornfein, Zimmerman, & Weisner, 1982; Mullis & Mullis, 1983). Research still appears to be lacking which identifies information needs for specific groups of parents.

Some research has been conducted investigating what problems are of concern to divorced single parents. Kurdek and Siesky (1978) found three problems of greatest concern to divorced single (female) parents: 1) discipline issues with their children; 2) behavior problems due to the parents' separation and following visits with the non-custodial parent; and, 3) lack of a consistent male model to whom their children could be exposed. Verzaro and Hennon (1980) concluded that there is a need to define what knowledge, skills, and coping patterns are important for survival in single-parent families.

Many researchers agree that most parent education programs have not been designed to meet specific parents' needs and concerns (Crase, Carlson, & Kontos, 1981; Hughes & Durio, 1983; Kamerman, 1980; Mullis & Mullis, 1983; Powell, 1983; Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). Powell (1983) reported that evaluations of parent education

programs should focus on examining the relations between specific parents' characteristics and the attributes of the program. Without considering this relationship, the program outcome may not be as effective as it could be. In order to achieve a high effectiveness level, the needs and backgrounds of the specific parent population to be served must be known.

Several studies have concluded that parent education curriculum should be based on information needs of small groups of parents (Crase, Carlson, & Kontos, 1981; Harman & Brim, 1980; Hughes & Durio, 1983; Mullis & Mullis, 1983). During the 1970's, parent education programs focused on delivering what was considered by the researchers to be the best objective information. Little emphasis was placed on determining what information parents most desired. This was considered to be the expert approach to parent education content development (Harman & Brim, 1980). Toward the end of the decade, there was a shift away from the expert approach. Harman and Brim (1980) found that the shift was toward the 'supermarket approach.' Parent educators considered parents to be experts in choosing what information they needed. Various parent education programs were offered from which the general public could choose; hence the term 'supermarket approach' (Harman & Brim, 1980).

Rather than offering parent education programs based on these two approaches, Harman and Brim (1980) advocate the development of "situation-specific" strategies of parent education content

selection. Situation-specific programs would recognize that particular groups of parents have particular needs. Parent education programs could then be designed for a small group of parents sharing common backgrounds or information needs. Since there is an apparent lack of knowledge concerning single parents' information needs, this approach to content selection of parent education programs for single parents is currently difficult to implement. With further research into the needs and interests of single parents regarding the content of parent education programs, this approach would be a viable option.

Crase, Carlson, and Kontos (1981) found that little research had been done that focused on determining the information needs of parents and the sources of information parents used to meet these needs. Subsequently, a few studies have focused on determining sources of information used by parents. These findings indicate that parents used a variety of information sources. The preferred sources for parenting information were people such as pediatricians, parents, teachers, and friends rather than sources such as books and magazines (Crase, Carlson, & Kontos, 1981; Eiduson, Kornfein, Zimmerman, & Weisner, 1982; Mullis & Mullis, 1983). These studies are helpful in recognizing what sources are often utilized but do not offer information regarding parents' information needs and desires.

Crase, Carlson, and Kontos (1981) reported that increasing numbers of working mothers and single parents creates a greater

need regarding parents' needs for information. Many of the current parenting programs are geared to the traditional two-parent family thus ignoring the needs and concerns that might be particular to single parents (Swick & Bollinger, 1980). Merrill (1980) reported that demands and frustrations that develop in single-parent homes may lead to parenting problems.

Kurdek and Siesky (1978) conducted a study that focused on determining what kinds of problems divorced single parents faced. They found that the problems of greatest concern centered on three areas: 1) discipline of the children; 2) behavior problems resulting from the parental separation and, 3) single mothers reported the lack of a consistent male role model to whom their children could be exposed. Information such as this is useful in generalizing about areas that are perceived as problem areas to divorced single parents. Further research is needed to identify what kinds of educational information and/or support systems single parents desire related to specific problem areas.

Meyer (1980) and Stephens (1980) each advocated parent education programs that dealt with parents' own issues and needs instead of only focusing on children's developmental needs and behavior problems. Stephens (1980) said that a discussion of parent needs may be the most needed part of a parent education curriculum. Meyer (1980) differentiated between parenting needs and child-rearing needs. 'Parenting needs' deal with what is happening with the child. Many parenting "how-to" books deal with

these issues. 'Child-rearing needs' deal with the adult's issues related to being a parent and raising children. Examples of these issues include the kinds of adult growth that can occur through parenting, stresses occurring as a result of having children, the normalacy of parental responses to stresses, and how parents can be "good parents" to themselves (Meyer, 1980).

Adequate support systems for parents in general are lacking in American society according to Swick and Bollinger (1980). This may be even more evident in the areas of support systems for single parents. Group support systems are known to be helpful and effective means of support (Auerbach, 1968). Social programs for single parents, such as Parents Without Partners, can be found in many communities. These programs offer mainly social support and do not focus on single parents' information needs (Hall & Nelson, 1981).

There are a few parent education programs that are being developed or adapted for single parents. Examples of these are the "Parenting Alone Successfully (PALS)" and "Responsive Parenting" programs (Hall & Nelson, 1981; Leavitt & Davis, 1980). PALS was designed for single parents and focused specifically on parents having difficulty managing their children's behavior (Leavitt & Davis, 1980). Responsive Parenting programs also deal with teaching effective ways to manage children's behavior and has been successfully adapted for single-parent groups (Hall & Nelson, 1981).

As programs such as these appear, a concern develops as to whether these programs are indicative of parents' information needs and concerns or if they are only offering the ideas that parent educators feel should be of most concern to single parents (Crase, Carlson, & Kontos, 1981). Further investigations are needed to adequately assess this concern.

Reviewing the literature reveals a large gap in determining the information single parents need and desire and the relationship to parent education programs of these needs and desires. In order to effectively evaluate parent education programs, an investigation must be made of different program attributes, specific parents' needs, and parental backgrounds (Powell, 1982). Before being able to make this evaluation, the needs and concerns of single parents must be explored.

METHODOLOGY

The present investigation was a descriptive study of the perceived interests and needs of female single parents regarding content of parent education programs.

Participants in this study were female single parent custodial parents of children age seven (7) and younger. The sample of single parents was a select sample drawn from participants enrolled in family life education classes in urban areas in the Pacific Northwest. These were parents with children enrolled in full-time center-based programs.

The instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire chosen to allow parents to complete the survey in private and to avoid interviewer bias. A 47-question structured questionnaire was developed for use in the study and was divided into five sections: 1) topical areas of interest in a parent education program; 2) support which could be offered through a parent education program; 3) factors influencing participation in a parent education program; 4) methods of information presentation for a parent education program; and, 5) demographic information.

DATA ANALYSIS

The responses were coded and analyzed by computer. Frequency tables were figured for all questions and basic descriptive data collected. Percentages, mean, and median add further information to the descriptive data.

Demographic Description

The sample consisted of 66 subjects all of whom were single-parent mothers with children aged seven years or younger. The age range of the subjects varied from the age of 20 to 44 with the median age category being 25 - 29 years. Forty-five percent (45%) of the sample was between the ages of 25 and 29. The mean age was 30 years. Eighty-eight percent of the subjects were white, with 7.5% Native Americans and 4.5% blacks.

The median number of children living in the single-parent households was two. Twenty-three households (35%) fell into this median category. Fifty percent (50%) of the households had only

one child and fifteen percent (15%) had three or more children. An overwhelming majority (95%) of the single-parent mothers had legal custody of their children.

There was a total of eighty-six children aged seven or younger living in the sixty-six households represented. Nine of these children (11%) were under the age to two. Thirty-two (37%) were between the ages of two and three years. Thirty-one (36%) were four to five years of age and fourteen (16%) were six or seven years old.

In summary, the sample used for this research project included wide ranges in age, length of time as a single parent, and income levels. The majority of subjects were white, divorced, working on a community college or vocational degree, had either one or two children, had legal custody of their child(ren), and had incomes lower than $750 per month.

Results

There were many topical areas of interest identified by single-parent mothers as being important. Interest in each area was indicated by a response of "very interested," "somewhat interested," or "not at all interested." Areas were identified as significant if more than 50% of the subjects indicated a degree of interest.

SUMMARY OF SUPPORT ISSUES FOR ADULTS

Overall, single-parent mothers indicated moderate interest in parent education programs offering personal support in each of the

areas presented. There was no overwhelming supportive issue identified as being extremely important although the greatest level of interest was for parent education programs to offer the following kinds of support: 1) recreational or stress-relieving activities; and, 2) opportunities to locate and develop opposite-sex role-models for their children. Kurdek and Siesky (1978) found that single-parent mothers reported the lack of a consistent male role model to whom their child(ren) could be exposed. This finding seems to be consistent with the kind of support the subjects in this sample were interested in developing.

Age of this sample of single-parent mothers seems to be a non-significant factor in the type of support desired in a parent education program. This finding presents itself in the form of a question: "Why isn't age a significant factor?"

It seems the answer lies in the situational aspects of being a single parent. Even though age may vary, the other aspects of life may differ very little. A single parent faces time pressure and role demands (Barry, 1979; Berry, 1981); financial and economic problems (Barry, 1979; Jauch, 1977 Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986); feelings of depression, isolation, and social estrangement (Berry, 1981; Jauch, 1977); and, pressures of relations with their children (Barry, 1979; Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). These factors seem to be consistent across age differences among single-parent mothers of differing ages in this study. They also showed similar interests in areas of support that would be desired through a parent education program.

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARTICIPATION

The factors analyzed in this section were: 1) location of the parent education meetings; 2) time of the parent education meetings; 3) frequency of the meetings; 4) availability of transportation services; 5) availability of child-care services; and, 6) cost of the parent education program. Each survey question offered a number of variables from which the respondent identified the most desirable situation as the response.

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents indicated that a parent education meeting should be held in the early evening on a week-day with child care provided. The program should also be offered at no cost to the participants and be held preferably once every two weeks. Most participants in this study felt able to provide their own transportation. The preferred location of the meeting was in a community building, at a community college or vocational school facility, or any suitable setting that was close to the participant's home.

Knowing that child care arrangements and financial concerns were important considerations to the participants of this study is consistent with the concerns cited in the literature review. Many single-parent mothers are living at or under the federal poverty level (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986) and do not have the economic resources to pay for educational enrichment activities regardless of how interested they are in the content area or how pertinent the subject area is to their lives. For many of these single-parent mothers the only way they could participate in a parent education

program is if they did not have to pay for the cost of the program or the cost of child care that would be needed to attend the meetings. It could also be important to consider alternative methods of delivery of information such as television programming as identified by Coan (1976).

METHODS OF INFORMATION PRESENTATION

In this section of the survey, respondents reviewed different ways that information could be presented at a parent education meeting.

The methods of information presentation which generated the greatest interest were guest speakers, parent educator lectures, and media presentations. Single-parent mothers were moderately interested in the use of written materials, presentations made by program participants, opportunities for individual counseling sessions, and open discussions with no specific format. There was little interest in the use of homework assignments.

Summary and Discussion

Many single parent families share similar concerns even though there are varied conditions which result in the formation of one-parent families. Barry (1979) reported finding that problem areas centered on financial difficulties, fatigue due to meeting many daily demands, and difficulties associated with finding adequate and responsible child care. Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) report a general concern about economic well-being by single parent mothers. Jauch (1977) found concerns related to psychological needs and responsibilities of single-parenthood.

This study addressed some of these concerns and found them to be of great interest to single-parent mothers.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONCERNS

Single-parent mothers in this study has incomes ranging from under $550 per month to more than $1350 per month. The median monthly income category was $551 to $749. As a reflection of the financial situation of many single-parent mothers, fifty percent (50%) of this study said they would not be able to participate in a parent education program unless the program was offered at no cost. Almost seventy percent (70%) indicated that it would be necessary for child care to be provided as part of the parent education program. Again, many single-parent mothers do not have the economic resources available to afford any extra expense.

Another finding related to economic and financial concerns is the overwhelming interest in including an "effective financial management" component in a parent education program. Again, indications emerge that finances and economics are a major concern to single-parent mothers.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

Findings of this study indicate that single-parent mothers are interested in many topical areas that could be considered a part of social or psychological needs. Single-parent mothers were interested in learning about the following subject areas: emotional needs of children; stages of development in both children and adults; how to keep their children healthy; effective discipline and communication techniques; educational games to be

played/learned at home; how to deal with difficult issues such as death, war, and divorce; and stress management and relaxation techniques for themselves.

Subjects in this study were less interested in a parent education program offering strong social support and were more interested in gaining information/knowledge. The two support issues that were of greatest importance were: 1) provisions for recreational or stress-relieving activities, and 2) opportunities to locate and develop opposite-sex role-models for their children. Needing support in locating a male role model for children lacking this factor in the home is consistent with Kurdek and Siesky's (1978) findings.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND TIME PRESSURES

The findings of this study allow readers to see that single-parent mothers are interested in parent education programs but there are specific factors that will directly influence participation. Knowing that there are many time demands on single-parents, the majority indicated that the time, day, and frequency of parent education meetings would be very important. The location of the meetings is also important as it related to travelling time and distance from home.

RESPONSIBLE CHILD CARE FOR SINGLE PARENTS

Locating quality child care was an area in this study that was reported as a great concern to single-parent mothers. Single parents may face harder circumstances in locating quality child care based on limited financial resources which utlimately affects

opportunities available. The findings of this study indicating that child care would need to be provided for single-parent mothers to participate in a parent education program again points to the importance and magnitude of this concern overall.

Implications for Service Providers

The results of this research lead to specific recommendations for parent education service providers reaching single parent populations. The fact that most single-parent mothers cannot afford to pay for a parent education program or for child care that would be needed to attend meetings is of great importance to service providers. Other factors influencing or limiting single parent participation include the day, time, frequency, and location of the meetings.

Considering the topical areas of greatest interest and the methods of presentation most desired is another benefit and important factor presented in this study. Service providers need to review what single-parents want to know and what techniques of presenting this needed information would be best accepted by participants prior to planning their programs.

The finding that suggests single parents may be more interested in gaining information from a parent education program rather than participating in social activities has implications for parent education providers. The types of social support desired are activities and opportunities that may be initiated and developed in a group program but which can be continued on a more

long-term and personal basis. This seems to be the type of support desired by most single-parent mothers.

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